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ABSTRACT

An argument for counseling college-bound students in the senior year of high school rather than in the freshman year in college concentrates on: (1) adequate description of the languages taught in colleges, (2) importance of various languages in career planning, (3) identification of student linguistic potential, (4) study of a third language in college, and (5) how to counsel students for proper program articulation. (FL)

LANGUAGE COUNSELING IN HIGH SCHOOL

ED038881 As the High School Senior plans his College career, amid the excitements, the trepidations, the novelties, and the wonderments which mark this stage in his life, he will invariably spend hours perusing the College Catalogue, filling out forms indicating everything from his family's financial status to his choice of roommate. There are many decisions, much to be pondered. He will, of course, think about a Major, hope to take all those subjects which he had always heard about but never had the opportunity to study, and contemplate a full social life. Since he has probably had at least one foreign language in High School, he considers fulfilling his language requirement a rather routine matter.

When he sends in his preregistration card listing his choice of courses or when he consults during his first few days on campus with the advisor assigned to him, his choice of language will be the least trouble to all those involved. If he has started language X in High School, he will be encouraged to continue it: in so doing he will have to take fewer courses than if he began a new language and will consequently have more openings in his four-year program for electives. The average College requires of all its graduates that they complete the sophomore year of a foreign language. Those who enter with two years of High School work in one area need take only one year of it in College, beginners take two years. This seems to be the deciding factor in many instances.

A few schools do not demand any foreign language study to meet their graduation requirements, and most will exempt a student who enters with four years of one foreign language in High School from further language work in College. There are so many loopholes in the regulations pertaining to Language Studies, that many students drift through College without ever acquiring any of the benefits which can be had from a well planned and effective program of studies.

FL 001 274 By the time he arrives on campus, it is too late to advise him concerning linguistic matters in the personal and incisive way that he has come to expect during his High School years. No one at the College knows first-hand his linguistic potential. Upperclassmen fill his head with stories about this or that professor and the terrors of the Language Laboratory. Placement tests and similar exams often do not reveal his true ability or interest: students who have had their language during their first two years of High School display the results of a two-year lapse. Furthermore, since the College usually offers a larger selection of languages than the High School, the student, unless he is made aware of the merits and uses of each, will normally gravitate to those languages about which he already knows or else to those which rumor says are easy or useful.

By the time he reaches the status of an upperclassman, it is impossible usually for him to rearrange his tight schedule to take the language or languages which he has discovered would be of importance to him in Graduate School or in his professional and private life. Making the right choice at the very beginning is therefore crucial. There is not time for delay or for trial and error methods. We do not offer languages on a one semester basis: "Try it for six months and if you don't like it you have lost just one course." Our programs are geared to a two year sequence with additional semesters of intensified work if at all possible. Every semester is, therefore, precious. The right decision at the outset guarantees the student the kind of educational experience he should have.

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The time for counseling is during the student's senior year in High School not following a disastrous experience in his freshman semesters at College. The High School Language teacher knows his students from personal contact and in-class performance. The student has learned to respect his teacher and to confide in him. The situation is conducive to an informal discussion of the student's future and his goals in terms of the languages which might enrich and facilitate these goals.

Here are a few things with which every college-bound student ought to become acquainted before he leaves High School:

1) What are the languages which are taught in most Colleges and Universities? What is each like in terms of alphabet, structure, pronunciation, cultural heritage, etc." It is truly incredible how many young people are either totally ignorant of what Russian or Ancient Greek is like or else harbor the most fantastic misconceptions about them in terms of difficulties, uses, and so on.

2) What can the student do with these languages or how important will each be in relation to his chosen profession or academic advancement? Most people will acknowledge the usefulness of French and German in passing the language requirement provisions imposed upon Ph.D. candidates in almost all areas; however, few seem to realize that another language may usually be substituted for one of these if it has particular relevance to the candidate's major field. A comprehensive discussion of the uses of each language and of the requirements for advance degrees in most of the important centers of graduate work will help many students select a language which may not only assist them in their studies but may also mean a better chance for admission to the Graduate School or the Business Firm of their choice. One need not play down the added financial benefits of offering a language which, while in great demand, has few proficient: Russian, Chinese, Arabic. A Political Science major with Russian or Chinese often has more impressive credentials than one with Spanish or French. For those planning to teach, it is worth knowing that certain fields are fairly crowded while others have more positions available (e.g. Latin) than can possibly be filled.

3) What is the student's true linguistic potential? Here is a ticklish subject, for the student's grades will not necessarily be an accurate indication. The College adviser, depending upon grades and the student's evaluation of himself, cannot answer this question, but the High School teacher can and should. Several students may have achieved "A" grades in their languages courses. X may have been the kind of person who not only did all that was required by his teacher, but also voluntarily attended summer institutes, bought phonograph courses, read extra novels, and possibly managed to spend a summer abroad. Y crammed for all the exams and completed every assignment and exercise to perfection, but cannot match X when it comes to oral-aural work; however, the teacher of both X and Y graded only on written work, so both received top marks. Z is a better than average student but is rather weak compared with X and Y; however, Z is very enthusiastic about her language classes, keeps beautiful notebooks, is always bringing in things for the bulletin board, writes skits for the Language Club, and was chairman of the annual banquet. She too received an "A", more for her numerous activities than for her mastery of the subject matter. R, who has a fine command of the language, managed to make only "B's" because his teacher graded on attendance and outside projects: he failed to turn in a toothpick model of the Eiffel Tower. S is a weak student, a "C" at best; but because his teacher felt sorry for him after his father's accident and concluded that the shock had prevented him from doing better work, she gave him a "B". The variety in grading systems is infinite, but the one fact which is certain is that students often cherish false notions of their abilities because of the grades which they have received. A teacher ought, no matter how embarrassing it may be, to tell

each student who considers continuing in his language just how he measures up in terms of an absolute scale or the national norms. Some students, regardless of their grades, should be dissuaded from going on in a language unless they are prepared to put in extra hours to make up for certain deficiencies. Others, whose grades may not seem to indicate their real ability, should be encouraged to go on. Still others who think majoring in a language means merely staging parties and plays, must be told the facts of linguistic life before they enroll in the upper level courses in college. Many bright students, those whom the profession desperately needs as majors and future teachers, often neurotically underestimate their linguistic talents and preparedness and will respond successfully to the counselor's interest and obvious recognition of their ability. Students who have had unfortunate experiences in a given language and are ill prepared to continue it in college, should be told the benefits of starting a new language instead of being urged to "get the requirement out of the way by taking just one more year."

4) Is it better for the student to continue one language for a number of years or to take two languages or more? The answer to this question depends upon the individual's circumstances. Students who obviously do not plan to do much with their language training, those who take such courses merely to develop the reading knowledge needed for research or admission to advance degree programs, will probably find it to their advantage to have two different foreign idioms at their disposal, fluency in any one area being unimportant for them. Similarly, young people interested in a Liberal Arts education, where the emphasis is on quantitative exposure to learning, are wiser to take as many languages as possible, as did their ancestors during the last century. Certainly, persons who are involved in Comparative Literature or History will find being a polyglot of immense value. One can, after all, develop fluency on one's own when and if the need or desire arises. Acquiring the fundamentals is the painful and more difficult part.

5) What should a student do who has taken his two years of foreign language during his freshman and sophomore semesters and has had no contact with that language since then? Ideally every student who plans to enter college ought to continue his language studies through the entire four years of secondary school, even if he merely audits the upper-level courses. Since the average student does not do this, there exists a very real problem and no panacea. The lapse in time can be partially offset by one or another approach, provided, of course, that the student is willing to take upon himself the additional responsibility. His reward for the extra effort and time will be better grades in college language courses and a more enjoyable freshman year. The easiest remedy is found in a well disciplined and systematic program of self-help during the summer months preceding his arrival on campus. Where this is impractical a tutor or some type of summer school course might be recommended. For those who cannot manage to prepare themselves in advance, most colleges offer special sections of remedial and intermediate language training designed to offer a complete review of the fundamentals and to build up proficiency in reading and speaking. As a last resort, students with very poor backgrounds or with special problems should be encouraged to begin a new language where they can make a fresh start linguistically without any carryover of emotional stigmata. For those whose chief difficulty appears to be an inability to acquire facility in pronouncing and speaking foreign languages an adviser might recommend a classical language such as Latin or Ancient Greek, where such skills are the least stressed.

Since the high school teacher knows his students, he can help them answer these and other questions in an intelligent and effective way. How he and his colleagues choose to set up such a counseling program is a matter for each school to consider in the light of its students, staff, facilities, and time schedule.

It may perhaps be possible to invite professors from nearby schools to speak informally with students about the type of language training in the various disciplines offered by the colleges and universities; the minimum requirements for admission to each level; the type of teaching methods employed (all lectures delivered in the foreign idiom; papers permitted to be written in English or else in the language studied, etc.); the opportunity for study abroad; the job-placement situation; career opportunities; etc.

The High School Language Departments might cooperate in giving a series of talks on the above subjects or others which they feel must be called to the attention of their students.

Lastly, but most important of all, each teacher ought to try to counsel with each of his seniors, or those, now seniors, who took their language work at an earlier period. He should point out what he considers to be the student's linguistic aptitude, advise the student as to the probability that he may find college language course X too easy or course Z too difficult. Many good students are lost as majors simply because they were placed into a course which exceeded their level of ability at the time they began college. Others found themselves in beginning sections of a language and became so bored that they sought more challenging areas elsewhere. Students who plan to major in languages should have a clear idea of what is involved: hard work, grammar, some degree of fluency--not fiestas, miniature bull fights, Roman banquets, costume designing, pretty bulletin boards, etc. The fact that literature and cultural history are the core of the major may surprise the student who thinks of language as merely putting endings on stems and reciting parts of speech. We must in a true spirit of ecumenicity consider ourselves teachers of languages, not French teachers, or German instructors, or Latin preceptors. The right choice for our students may not always be in our particular language area. It is our professional obligation to advise our students honestly no matter if it means suggesting that some other language would profit them more. It is not a matter of proselytizing, but of seeing that every young person who goes on to college makes the most of his opportunity not only in terms of his major area but in his language training as well. A language or many languages are assets, sometimes hidden, on which every educated person ought to be able to draw.
